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AUTHOR Powell, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

Currently two-year colleges are faced with the challenge of developing and implementing programs of technical communications that will serve the wide range of needs of the vocational-technical student. Cedar Valley College (Texas) responded to this challenge by developing a communications course for the developmental student. The course has four units: (1) the improvement of interpersonal skills in which students are taught to recognize nonverbal communication, to listen actively, to locate the main thought while reading, and to select appropriate language for communicating messages; (2) the improvement of learning skills in which students are taught to take notes, to study, and to ask and answer questions; (3) the improvement of on-the-job communication that focuses upon the student's special technical area of work; and (4) the improvement of consumer communication skills that focuses on the student's awareness of persuasive techniques. Students at the academic proficiency level were offered a college transfer level communications course that combined communication skills with practical career activities. Each of these courses takes into account the special needs of the student and recognizes the role that language plays in a student's life. (HOD)

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THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUDING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATIONS IN THE VOCATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Joyce Powell

What is technical communications? And why should technical communications be included in vocational-technical programs on our campuses? These questions don't have easy answers. The community college with its trend toward accomodating all learners has often overlooked the communications needs of voc/tec students. This paper will explain how technical communication can be taught in voc/tec programs.

Although communication skills may have been neglected in the voc/tec curriculum in the past, presently there is new concern brought about by the emphasis upon "back to basics" and new interest in adult lifelong learning. Both of these components are represented among college voc/tec students. Currently, two-year colleges are faced with developing and implementing programs of technical communications that will serve the voc/tec students on our campuses.

One of the first tasks of planning a voc/tec communications program is to consider the students in order to determine learner needs. Voc/tec students like other "open door" students will range by ability into a wide spread of skill levels which can be divided into developmental and academic levels. By carefully diagnosing the skill levels of voc/tec students before planning a communications curriculum, many of the difficulties of implementation can be avoided. This point is reinforced by Robert Mager and Kenneth Beach in Developing Vocational Instruction.[1] They point out that if only seventy percent of the students reach the performance level, then thirty percent of them fail to reach that level. To improve instructional efficiency, curriculum must be designed to develop the skills needed by the learners. Consequently, planning and organizing curriculum should be done with adequate information about student skills.

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Also, communication courses designed for voc/tec students need a humanistic approach. Communications models developed from a humanistic base will be distinctly different from those industrial models that consider students as products and talk about delivery systems. "That very language identifies them for what they are," says Cross, "systems designed to produce mass conformity."[2] Cross also reminds us in Vocational Instruction that uniqueness is the most precious characteristic of humanity. When uniqueness is respected, individuals are valued. Students who are treated well achieve more than students who are not. Especially is uniqueness to be respected in communication courses designed for voc/tec learners.

And, language holds the "key" to success for voc/tec students. Communications instructors understand the role that language plays in a student's life. Language is an integral part of one's personality. A student's language is his only medium of learning. The student uses that language to organize experiences, think, talk over needs, react to the world, express emotions. Thus, in teaching basic communications or in improving fundamental communication skills, to undermine a student's language is to undermine his ability to learn, while to develop his language is to open new vistas in his mind. Michael Marland summerized this same idea in Language Across the Curriculum. He writes: "A language policy is a learning policy."[3] Language is at the heart of all subjects and skills we learn. Thus, developing communication skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) is the key to a successful voc/tec program. As we planned our communication courses at Cedar Valley College, we were cognizant of three maxims:

1. Students need to be taught at a level where they can be successful in building skills.
2. Students need to be taught with a "humanistic" curriculum.
3. Students need to develop language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing.

More than a year before the Developmental Communications course was to be taught at CVC, plans were being made to develop the course curriculum.

Consideration was first given to the students enrolling in the courses. Working with the Vocational Academic Dean and the voc/tec faculty, the communication instructors identified the skill levels of our potential students.

The students were tested to determine reading levels, language usage levels, and math skills. A writing sample consisting of a short paragraph (10 sentences) on a work-related experience was included. After this evaluation, a personal profile was developed for each student, including remarks and comments from the voc/tec instructors who were currently working with these students.

Throughout the next six months the curriculum was developed with learning objectives and learning activities. The course rationale was supported by communications instructors, voc/tec faculty, and college administration. All agreed that communication skills are necessary tools for achieving personal, academic and vocational goals.

Next, consideration was given to the skill levels of the students we had tested and profiled. CVC voc/tec students seemed to fit roughly into two skill levels: developmental and academic.

The first group to be profiled were the fundamental skills learners--students needing to develop their communication skills. For this group, we prepared the curriculum for the course entitled Developmental Communications 095.

The objective of the course is personalized by experiential instruction: "Through step-by-step learning experiences, you may expect to improve your communication skills in listening, reading, writing, and speaking in order to be more effective in achieving your personal, academic, and vocational goals." This practical humanistic life skills focus gives relevancy to the instruction.

The course is developed in four units: (1) Improving Your Interpersonal Skills, (2) Improving Your Learning Skills, (3) Improving your On-the-Job Communication Skills and (4) Improving your Communication Skills as a Consumer.

Each Unit presents a unit objective, then lists learning objectives and learning activities. For example, Unit I: Improving Your Interpersonal Skills, the Unit Objective states: "You will learn the importance of good communication skills in attaining your goals."

The conditions for evaluation emphasize a "learning-by-doing" approach. "Your grade for this unit will be based upon your completion of the learning activities." Each unit gives repeated drills on the communication skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

The Unit I Learning Objectives include become aware of the communication process, recognize non-verbal communication types, listen actively, locate the main thought when reading, and select appropiate language for communicating messages. Each objective is followed with learning activities. The plan is to present by graphic lecture the concepts, and then develop the skills by practice. For example, in the learning objective, listen actively, the graphic lecture presents and illustrates the active listening techniques. Then, each student develops a personal Listening Profile. The remainder of the class time is spent in practicing the active listening techniques learned from the lecture. This same procedure is repeated for other learning objectives with learning activities to help the student refine interpersonal communication skills.

Unit II: Improving your Learning Skills has as its objective refining the skills needed for being successful as a student. Before preparing this unit, we investigated the academic requirements of the voc/tec courses in which these students were enrolled. The findings were startling: These students were expected to attend lectures, take notes, read textbooks, ask questions in class and answer a variety of types of test questions. From these expectations, the learning objectives for Unit II were developed: Use a listening plan, a note-taking system, a study-reading system, and learn techniques for asking and answering questions. The learning activities for this unit are teacher-made and tailored to learner needs. The same plan as

used in Unit I continues; first presentation of a system or technique, and then, practical drill to reinforce the skill.

Unit III, Improving Your on-the Job Communication Skills, continues to focus upon the student's special technical area of work. (i.e. Vocabulary development is not the same for auto mechanic students as for air conditioning students.) The word card method teaches the system, and then students add the words from the technical vocabulary of their work speciality. Learning to follow directions also presents a system that can be applied to various work areas as can writing on-the-job directions. The CSSD word attack method (context, structure, sound, dictionary) is a reading skill developed for new or technical material. This unit involves more calendar time than the first two, but keeps its appeal to students because of the practical application of the skills learned to the world of work.

Unit IV, Improving Your Consumer Communication Skills, is Life Skills in practice. The Learning Objectives are concerned with persuasive techniques, how we can use them and how they are used on us. The same skills are presented: Listening to identify persuasion; reading to identify persuasion; writing using persuasive technizues; speaking using persuasive techniques. The language of persuasion becomes a tool for improving consumer skills.

This Developmental Communication course is taught by communication instructors on the voc/tec premises of the campus. The students are welcomed into the classroom in their shop clothes and are provided instructional materials kept on location. The students are expected to attend all classes, complete each skill activity, and organize their instructional materials by the unit. Meeting these expectations results in completion of the course.

The goal of Developmental Communications 095 is improvement and the method is experiential instruction. At this time these materials have been used by two instructors. This program will continue to be refined and improved to develop the communication skills of other voc/tec students.

The second group, as profiled by skill level tests when planning

the communication curriculum for voc/tec students is the academic profeciency level. These students possess reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills of an "adequate" level for doing "academic" work. The course Communications 131 is a college transfer level course in communications developed for vocational-technical students. Its content combines communication skills with practical career activities. The learning experiences of this course include reading and writing assignments that are both technical and practical. Skills are emphasized in a real-to-life context.

Presently, at CVC these two courses are the framework of technical communications for the voc/tec students. Actually, the program is new, and we have not yet determined precisely course competencies. By collecting data on student performance, we may be able to evaluate performance to determine the level of skills developed in DC 095. Currently, if a student has completed the work in DC 095, he may enroll in Communications 131. Since a significant number of our students do not complete programs, we are assuming it is better that students be allowed to continue taking communication courses, rather than our becoming too restrictive on entrance levels based on achievement. However, if the student lacks the academic skills required in Communications 131, he will not be able to satisfactorily complete the course.

Certainly we have not solved all of the problems of including communications courses in the voc/tec programs of the two-year college; nonetheless, these courses represent a practical program for Cedar Valley College, and a new dimension in learning for voc/tec students.

NOTES

[1]Robert F. Mager and Kenneth M. Beach Jr. Developing Vocational Instruction, Belmont, Calif.: Fearon-Pitman Publishers, Inc., 1967.
[2]Aleene A. Cross, ed. Vocational Instruction. Arlington, Va.: The American Vocational Ass. Inc., 1979.
[3]Michael Marland. Language Across the Curriculum. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979.